Crass Acts

How did 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia' — a tasteless sitcom about terrible people — become one of the most beloved shows in American history?

By M.H. Miller

Photographs by Sinna Nasseri

As one of my last acts as a suburban teenager, about two weeks before moving out of my parents' house for college, I watched the pilot episode of "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" in my family's living room. This would have been Aug. 4, 2005, a Thursday. A comedy about a group of malignant narcissists who own a trashy bar in Philly called Paddy's, "Always Sunny" was, from Day 1, offensive even for an era in which offensiveness was so ingrained in our culture that it went largely unremarked upon. George W. Bush was seven months into his second term as president. You could still smoke in most bars. If you watched cable TV past 9 p.m., you would reliably see long infomercials for direct-to-video series like "Girls Gone Wild" or "Bumfights," both of which were somehow less offensive than "Entourage," then considered one of the smarter shows on HBO.

My high school friends and I had all just received .edu email addresses from the colleges that accepted us, which was a prerequisite for joining a new social network called The Facebook, a website founded only the year before by a computer-science major in his Harvard dorm room; he made it shortly after creating another website, Facemash, a campuswide ranking system of female coeds by order of attractiveness. In a parking lot at NBC's studios in Los Angeles, Donald Trump, who was the host of a reality show on that network, spoke into a hot mic during an interview with a host from "Access Hollywood" — who was George W. Bush's first cousin — and remarked upon how he treats the women he encounters: "I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything."

You can do anything. That was just how it was then. "Always Sunny" stood out to me immediately as the greatest sendup of a time when the bad guys kept getting away with it and the ignorance of an American culture that was happy to let them. Being so young, I didn't know at the time that this would remain an evergreen topic 20 years later. Nor did I realize that "Always Sunny" would become — as it begins its 17th season this month on FX — the longest-running live-action sitcom ever to appear on television by a fairly wide margin.

Our very method of viewing TV has changed immeasurably and continually over this period. Being a chronic "Always Sunny" watcher, I can track time, in a big-picture sort of way, by recalling how I viewed certain seasons of the show — basic cable, DVD box set, pirated online, streaming. And I'll forever remember the spring of 2025 as the year I interviewed the show's main cast over a series of Zoom calls and watched its 17th season in an early-look unfinished copy somewhere deep in the bowels of the Disney corporation's online library. Through everything — mergers, acquisitions, wars, a life-altering pandemic, seismic technological and ideological shifts — the show remained itself, on the same network, using the same sets and writers and production staff, with the same actors doing the same characters.

The series creator, Rob McElhenney, plays Mac, a closeted and deeply insecure man who serves, poorly and unnecessarily (because there are rarely any customers), as the bar's bouncer. Last month, McElhenney legally changed his last name to Mac. But Charlie Day has always shared a name with his character, Charlie, the bar's janitor, an illiterate stalker who suffers from what the DSM-5 has labeled pica, or the compulsive consumption of inedible objects, especially viscous chemicals like paint, bleach and suntan lotion. Working behind the bar are Dee (Kaitlin Olson), a failed actress with no self-worth, and her fraternal twin, Dennis (Glenn Howerton), who is the closest thing the group has to a true leader but is also a Ted Bundy-esque tyrant who keeps a kill kit in a hidden compartment in the trunk of his car. Worst of all is Dennis and Dee's father, Frank, played against type by national treasure Danny DeVito, who is a little bit of all of the above. In his first appearance on the show, as part of a story line in which all members of the main cast fake being disabled, each for a distinctly idiotic reason, he pretends to be paraplegic in order to receive special treatment from the dancers at a strip club.

The main characters are formally known as "the gang," and on certain corners of the internet, diagnosing the worst thing they've ever done is a never-ending parlor game. And the gang is guilty of all the biblical wrongs that the 21st century has gradually tried to exclude, at least from its art, up to and including racism, child abuse and (attempted) incest and cannibalism. Was the low point when Dee created an imaginary son for herself to earn a tax break, which she used to buy a moped, before staging a funeral for the fake child and inviting the I.R.S. agent who was auditing her? Or when Charlie acquires a taste for human flesh and goes to the morgue with a hot plate to try to quell his forbidden hunger? Maybe it was when Mac killed a puppy, then cooked and fed it to Dennis because he wasn't being appreciative enough of their friendship. Perhaps it was when Dennis bought a boat to lure young girls out into open waters, where they couldn't refuse his sexual advances "because of the implication."

Pushing humor to uncomfortable extremes is a long sitcom tradition stretching all the way back to "I Love Lucy." "Seinfeld" and its mantra of "no hugging, no learning" is an obvious precedent, but even George and Kramer led comparatively charmed and functional lives. "South Park" has been on television even longer than "Always Sunny," though its humor is often an example of that which it derides — the sadism of schoolyard bullies. But a good episode of "Always Sunny" went further and was more deranged, more analytical than anything before or since. It's as if it were written by the people who grew up the victims of all those schoolyard bullies, who had a preternatural understanding that the bullies were actually morons and stuck around long enough to watch the morons grow into losers.

For me, the show is one of the few works of art made in my lifetime that are truly cathartic. For a half-hour at a time, I get to laugh uncontrollably at the human capacity for cruelty. The reason it has worked for so long, and remains so watchable, is not just the lengths

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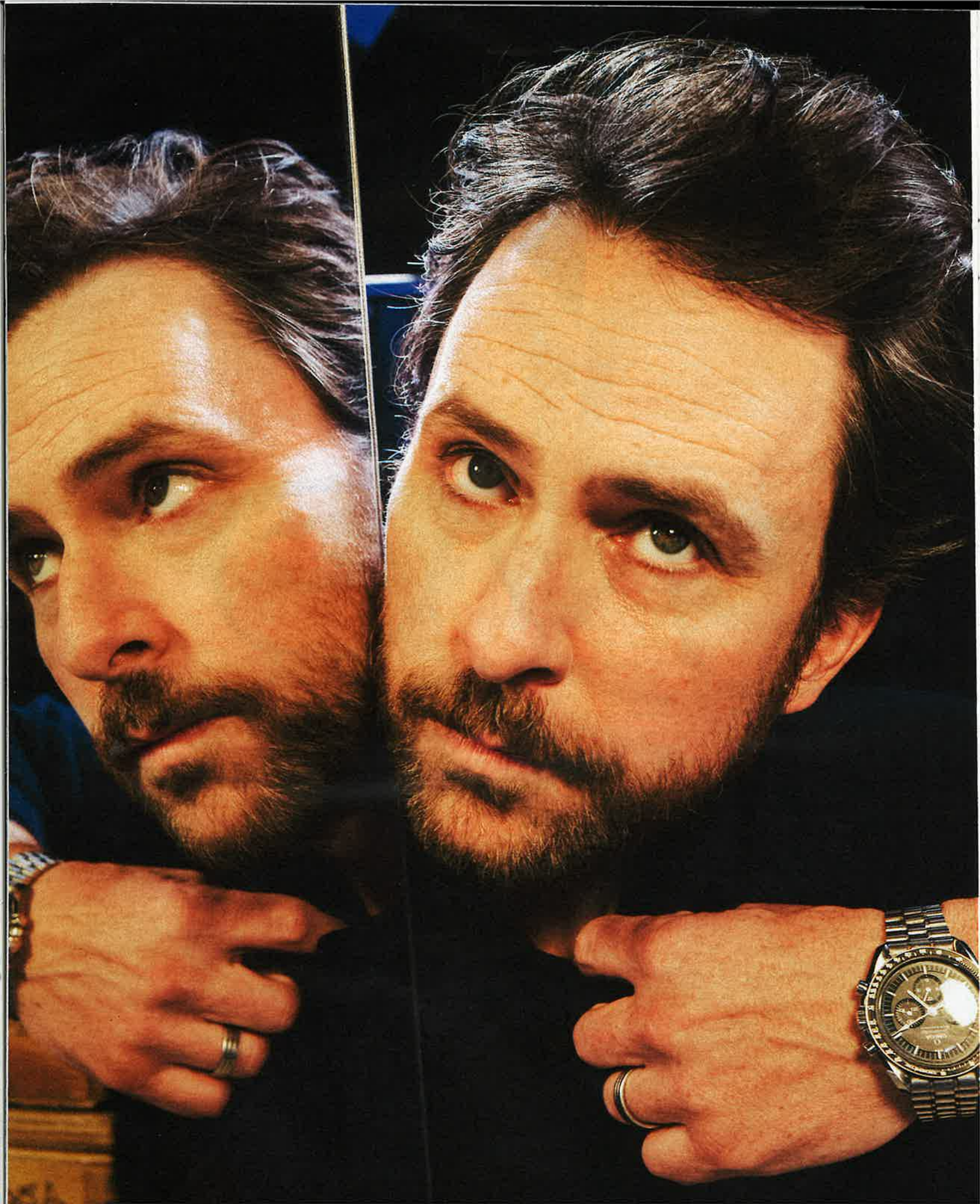
Prop stylist: Ali Gallagher

Photograph by Sinna Nasseri for The New York Times



"Always Sunny" will go for a laugh but also the fact that it doesn't glamorize the cruelty: The gang is invariably depicted as ridiculous and almost impossibly stupid. Like Mark Twain or the Three Stooges, it has never punched down. Somehow, this show in which five people are incessantly mean to one another isn't mean itself. It's more an indictment of meanness. "Just mean isn't funny," Olson said when we talked this spring. "Ever."

Indeed, the joke's always on the gang. Mac explained to me that his initial vision for the show was something like a Bizarro World "Friends." "If the theme of 'Friends' is 'I'll be there for you,'" he said, "friends that will be with each other through thick and thin, no matter what the circumstances are," then "Always Sunny" is about "the idea of friends that would *never* be there for each other, that would sell each other out at a moment's notice and were always looking out for themselves well before they were looking out for anybody else." A group of people so detestable that all they have is one another. "Because no one else will be friends with them."

Their punishment, which is ongoing and possibly eternal, is to have to continue to exist in the world of "Always Sunny," never changing, never growing, never experiencing much outside the parameters of one another's selfishness and the dim lights of Paddy's, the very center of their universe, which is less a charming dive in the tradition of "Cheers" and more, to paraphrase a restaurant critic who made a visit there in Season 4, a "nightmare in [a] putrid [expletive] hole." If that description matches how you've felt about living in the United States at some point in the last 20 years, you're probably already a dedicated viewer of "Always Sunny."

That this show

has become the defining American sitcom is obvious to its resolute fan base and probably a bit of a surprise to everyone else. We're a culture that's absolutely obsessed with television, and that's nothing new, but our fixation has only grown more intense and twisted since "Always Sunny" first aired. The last 20 years have been the medium's supposed golden age, an era when even The New York Times publishes feverish recaps of "Yellowjackets." But "Always Sunny" has consistently been absent from the conversation about peak TV or appointment viewing or cringe comedy or whatever other development momentarily preoccupies the television-criticism industrial complex.

In fact, by any standard metric we use to judge commercial or critical achievement, "Always Sunny" isn't remotely successful, despite its longevity. Mostly, the show has been ignored by the mainstream, beyond a few confused negative notices early on. (It seems "determined to repel viewers as some sort of litmus test," The Seattle Times wrote in a rare review of Season 1, adding that the show contains "a fair amount" of "puking.") It has never been nominated for a major award, unlike so many inferior shows, including "Entourage," which won *six* Emmys. It has survived mostly by word of mouth, luck and the sheer willpower of its fans and creators.

Mac was born in Philadelphia and met Day and Howerton through acting auditions in New York. They were all young men around the same age going after the same parts, having the same grueling experience of repeated rejection. Unable to book anything, Mac was supporting himself as a bar back and a waiter. On the advice of his manager, he taught himself how to write scripts so he could shop around his own screenplay to star in. His first attempt, a gritty drama set at a New York City nightclub, was optioned by the filmmaker Paul Schrader. Over the next year, Mac worked on rewrites based on Schrader's suggestions, until both were left with a script that neither of them particularly liked. (Reached by email, Schrader said he has "no recollection" of any of this.) Mac learned a few things about screenwriting but mostly came to the conclusion that he would need total creative control over his next project.

Mac, Howerton and Day all ended up moving to Los Angeles around the same time. Howerton had a starring role in "That '80s Show," a Fox sitcom that was canceled after one season. Day had a job as the voice of the Independent Film Channel, saying "Coming up next on I.F.C." Mac told himself he would try for a year to find acting work and see what happened. One afternoon, after Day finished a recording, Mac met him across the street from the studio for a coffee. "We were kvetching about there not being enough material for us that we felt we could really shine in," Day said in a video interview from his car, which he had parked somewhere. "We would audition for these shows that we didn't really like, and half the time they would get canceled." They started self-producing short videos using a camcorder.

The original text of "Always Sunny" was one of these, from around 2003, written by Mac and starring Day and Howerton as neighbors. Howerton goes over to Day's house to ask him for some sugar, but Day is in crisis. He just learned he has cancer. "And he has to console me," Day recalled, "but he still wants to ask for the sugar, and he doesn't know how to do that." This became the episode that they presented to various network executives. John Landgraf, then the president of entertainment at FX, decided to take a chance on them. FX had produced only a handful of other original shows — "Rescue Me," about New York City firefighters, and "The Shield," about corrupt Los Angeles cops — but they were sleeper hits, critically lauded and concerned, like "Always Sunny" was, with what Landgraf described as a "blue-collar counterculture."

Landgraf, now FX's chairman, said the show "presaged" a lot of how we live now. "It was before the internet age," he explained, "and yet the trolling and jackassery and self-proclaimed expertise that defines internet culture is really at the core of these characters." Officially, the response was muted. The Nielsen ratings "weren't terrible, but they weren't great," Day said. There wasn't a lot of attention from corporate. The only creative intervention FX ever made was to hire DeVito after Season 1. This didn't do a lot for the ratings in the short term, but DeVito proved himself willing to go along with whatever anyone wanted and solidified his legend as a comedic actor. He has waterboarded Olson (and lit her on fire), been strung up by the neck, half-drowned, joined Charlie in his consumption of unpalatable objects and, in a Christmas special, was sewn fully nude into a leather couch. "Frank is in for a penny, in for a pound, or however you want to put it," DeVito said. Intriguingly, in our conversation, he compared "Always Sunny" to "Matilda," the Roald Dahl novel he made into a 1996 children's movie. Both are stories about "found family," he said, which is true, even if "Always Sunny" is a twisted inversion of that concept.

Megan Ganz, who watched the show in her dorm room at the University of Michigan, is now an executive producer and showrunner for the series. After gigs writing for "Modern Family" and "Community," she joined the "Always Sunny" writers' room in 2016 and immediately noticed a different working atmosphere. On "Community," Ganz had an ugly falling out with Dan Harmon, that show's creator, who admitted to (and publicly apologized for) sexually harassing her and retaliating after she rejected his advances. "Always Sunny," on the other hand, "was this very egalitarian, no-drama situation," she said. "I wasn't addressed as or made to feel like the woman writer in the room. I was working for showrunners who love their families, who don't want to stay all night working. They want to get the job done and go home and live their lives. *(Continued on Page 45)*

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Photograph by Sinna Nasseri for The New York Times

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(Continued from Page 33)

It's such a not-toxic room, which is funny because the show is so full of toxicity."

She felt so secure with the creators that, during the height of the #MeToo era, Ganz wrote an episode in which the gang has to attend sexual-harassment training after Paddy's ends up on a list of "unsafe spaces for women." It's a disaster. Dee makes false accusations against the other attendees. Frank exposes himself in a terry-cloth robe. Mac violently gropes Dee in front of everyone. Charlie is drunk. "It was so liberating to find the comedy in that thing," Ganz said. "I don't think there's any other room where I would've felt comfortable to tell that story other than 'Sunny.'"

I hadn't exactly expected the people who worked on this show to be sociopaths, but in talking to them, I was struck by how enlightened each of them was and the extent to which they attributed their own personal growth to the show. Recently, Mac and Olson — who married while Season 4 was airing — have been watching the series with their sons. "We really make a concerted effort to talk about the complexities and nuances of satire," Mac said, adding, "They're well-versed in that." Day credits the show with allowing him to live and work in Hollywood and still be around to raise his child. "It's such a gift to do something for this long," Day told me. "And you really have to continue to grow to do it. Even on a show where the characters don't — *you* have to." Howerton quit after Season 12, feeling that the show had run its course, but he felt so emotionally supported in his decision to leave by Day and Mac that he ended up staying, first just as a guest actor, then gradually returning full time to the writers' room by Season 15. He told me he thinks he'll be working in some capacity with Day and Mac for the rest of his life, whether the show survives another 20 years or not. "Because we love each other," he said, as if it were almost too obvious to say out loud.

The television industry started to change around the same time "Always Sunny" debuted. Fewer people were paying for cable. But they were watching more television than ever on their laptops and phones. According to Landgraf, during this transitional period, any time that the end seemed near, "some *force majeure*, some *deus ex machina*" swooped down and saved "Always Sunny." First, there were DVD collections that became staples of college dorm rooms across the world. Then, in 2008, Nielsen began to measure in its figures downloads from computers and mobile devices. This revealed the extent of the show's true popularity, which was soon bolstered by syndication on Comedy Central. People weren't tuning into FX on Tuesday at 10 p.m., but they were watching, even though lots of them didn't even own a television.

And at the same time that the nature of our consumption changed, the misanthropy of early 2000s TV gave way to humanist creators like Mike Schur and Greg Daniels, not to mention a culture-wide soul search about the value and ethics of offensive jokes. This shift affected numerous Disney properties. No more Apu on "The Simpsons." A casting-couch joke was cut from the midcredits "blooper reel" in "Toy Story 2." Disney acquired FX as part of its purchase of 21st Century Fox in 2019, and five episodes of "Always Sunny" soon disappeared from streaming.

Most of these revolved around a recurring plot point in which the gang tries to make a sixth "Lethal Weapon" movie and numerous characters appear, for various inane reasons, in blackface — and in the case of Mac, who plays Detective Murtaugh, his entire body is made up, in order to accommodate an extended shot of his bare buttocks. This censorship perplexed and disappointed the main cast. If anything, the pulled episodes have clearer morals than many of the others, going out of their way to mock the gang's disgusting entitlement. "A true bigot probably won't be able to appreciate the humor behind the show," Howerton said. And why stop at blackface? There's one episode in which Mac comes to believe that Charlie was molested by their elementary school gym teacher and becomes insanely jealous that he wasn't molested himself. "I was in that class," he says. "I was cute! I was energetic! I was *fun*. I mean, what exactly was this prick looking for?" As Mac put it to me, "It's difficult to suggest that some areas of exploration are verboten and some are not. I think you're either all in or you're all out."

We excised indiscretions from our sitcoms only to elect — twice — a reality-TV-star president who recently let Dr. Phil embed himself with federal law enforcement agencies conducting immigration raids in Los Angeles. Trump is another survivor of the degeneracy of early-aughts culture and a daily reminder of how much of that culture, if it hasn't already been forgotten or tepidly rebooted into profitable mediocrity, is now just too embarrassing and awful to even think about. *Of course* a show about the hideousness of human nature has survived mostly intact. It has survived long enough to create an altogether new type of television.

There's a certain kind of "Always Sunny" joke that only a sitcom that has lasted longer than what many might consider its prime could hone. It emerged in what turned out to be the series' middle period and, in what counts as an act of fan service, addresses the state of the show and the creators' ambivalence about continuing it. There's an episode from Season 9 that is, for example, about the perpetual awards-season freeze-out for "Always Sunny." Frank tries to get Paddy's nominated in a contest to find the best bar in Philadelphia. The gang spends the rest of the episode interrogating why they've never been honored in any way. "I can't imagine other people are doing what we're doing better," Dee says. Is it the drinks? Is it their location? At one point, Frank asks, sadly, "Is it us?"

The question implicates the longtime viewer, as well. Why *am* I still coming back for more? Any of the proper journalistic arguments I could offer to answer this question feel inadequate. I think more than anything, it's that — with the exception of a handful of close relationships, as well as my generalized anxiety disorder and clinical depression, which (spoiler alert) also made inauspicious debuts in 2005 — the show is the only thing in my life to last 20 years. In that time, it has felt like having a friend. When I was 17, I felt the way a lot of teenagers do: lonely and frightened and unlovable. As a teenager, "Always Sunny" taught me that the sheer unpleasantness of being alive some days was at least funny and that shame and embarrassment were where some of the best art lived.

Maybe I've gotten stupider since 2005, or maybe the entire world has, but at 37, I now find certain moments of "Always Sunny" genuinely profound, like the surprisingly tender episode in which Mac finally comes out to his absent and indifferent father. Watching the new season, I experienced what I will euphemistically describe as a lachrymal event during an episode dedicated to Lynne Marie Stewart, the actress who played Charlie's mother, who died shortly after filming wrapped.

A running story line on this season concerns another Disney property: "The Golden Bachelor." Frank lands the lead role on the show. ("I can't wait to find a grade-A, prime-cut piece of ass," he says in a promo segment, conceding after a short pause, "to love.") Nervous about having to appear on network television, the gang decides to rehearse a scripted dinner in front of a focus group they've hired. Of course it goes totally wrong. Dennis creeps everyone out, adding face tape to look younger until he contorts his visage into a Matt Gaetz-ian grin. Charlie removes all his body hair, including eyebrows, after Dennis tells him that he's too hairy. Dee, the failed actress, is convinced that this is the role that will finally make her famous enough to break free of her so-called friends. Mac, believing that the audience could never like him as himself, tries to cosplay as someone straight and tough but ends up looking like Freddie Mercury at Live Aid. After a month of workshopping, the gang finally realizes that the entire exercise was pointless. No one from ABC ever shows up. Frank had hired a fake family to appear on the show with him.

The episode concludes with what might be, from a behavioral perspective, the healthiest moment of the show's history. After the focus group leaves, Charlie tries to comfort everyone about their failures. "Well, look, man, forget it," he says. "Can we just be us? We're trying to please everyone, and that never works. People either get you or they don't." ◆